

# Heck, the Skipper's Flying— What Could Go Wrong?

by Lt. Ryan Bryla

It was August in the Arabian Gulf, and we were the early launch for the last event of the day. Unlike the four-hour Operation Southern Watch (OSW) missions we'd been flying for two months, this night flight was single-cycle, unit-level training. The aircraft commander and pilot at the controls was our skipper, a seasoned aviator with close to 4,000 hours in type. I was sitting copilot, as a recently designated 2P nugget with just more than 500 flight hours.

We launched on time. After the catapult shot, we climbed to altitude to assume station profile in the northern Arabian Gulf operating area. My role that night was simple; talk to center and be a good copilot.

As the skipper took mission profile, I coordinated with center. Once we were established, I worked out a rough estimate of fuel remaining at our scheduled recovery time: 8,500 pounds, or 4,500 pounds over the E-2C max trap. The training hop went smoothly, and soon we had 20 minutes until the first ramp time. When the last fighter checked in through Strike, we cleaned up, put the

throttles forward and headed toward mother. The skipper and I began the approach checks and decided not to adjust our fuel state until we heard the first aircraft push out of marshal.

After I checked in with marshal, I heard the first Hornet push from the bottom of the stack. We decided to adjust our fuel state by 2,000 pounds down to 6,000 pounds remaining, which meant we would have two hours airborne before reaching bingo. We reported to the crew that the fuel dump was on and got the reassuring backup response from the CICO, "Roger, fuel dump on."

About the time we turned on the fuel dump, I realized our MFCDUs (the pilot interface to the upgraded E-2C INS-GPS navigation suite) displayed our mission flight plan and not our divert plan. I decided to switch the flight plan as briefed. I told the skipper, changed the flight plan and sat back thinking, "We're ready to go, nothing else to do now. The skipper is heading to marshal, we have about 10 minutes until push time and all systems go."

A couple of minutes later, I looked at the CDI to see how the skipper's point-to-point was going.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed a yellow caution light.

“That’s weird,” I thought. “I don’t remember ever seeing the master-caution light come on.” Then I remembered the fuel dumps. We had dropped them out of our scan and forgot to secure them. I looked at the CO and said, “Fuel dumps!” He reached up and turned them off. As the caution light went out, our fuel was down to just more than 2,900 pounds.

After considering for a few moments, the skipper told me to call marshal and inform them of our situation. I toggled the mike and said, “Marshal, 602, state 2.9.”

After a couple of seconds and sounding surprised, marshal responded, “602, confirm state 2.9?” I confirmed the fuel state and requested an immediate push to the ship. We were told to turn direct mother and maintain altitude until clear of the stack.

While the skipper turned the aircraft, I grabbed the NATOPS pocket checklist and estimated a bingo to the nearest divert to be 1.9. I told the CO, and he requested the CICO break out his pocket checklist and double-check my numbers. We continued inbound as marshal spread the news to the rest of the stack. This time it wasn’t a result of bolters or foul-deck waveoffs, it was us. Once clear

of the marshal stack, we began our descent and switched to the final controller. The CICO came up with a bingo of 2.3, higher than what I’d figured.

The skipper decided to use the most conservative number, setting our bingo at 2.3. Our final-approach controller began giving us vectors to intercept the final bearing. Once we leveled off, the fuel-quantity gauge indicated 300 pounds over bingo.

The skipper dirtied up, noted the fuel state and started the approach, knowing it would be his only look at the ball before bingo. We picked up ACLS at about four miles; the skipper put the piper on the needles and kept it there all the way to touchdown for the OK 3-wire.

I sat in the aircraft for a couple of minutes after shutdown and tried to figure out how it was possible for a crew of five to put themselves in this situation. It was easy to see how it happened. First, repetitive operations had become too routine. After four-hour hops, we would be only about 1,000 pounds over max trap. I routinely held off on the dumps until a couple of minutes before push time to ensure we had the gas for a “Hummer dance.” Adjusting our fuel state prior to marshal was out of the ordinary and broke my habit pattern of adjusting while in the marshal stack. Instead of focusing on the task at hand—adjusting fuel—I let myself be distracted with the navigation plan in the MFCDU.

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The CICO normally acknowledged the fuel dump on call and announced to the front end each passing minute. This time, the crew was deep into debriefing their mission and was not focused on the approach.

Breakdowns in communication and aircrew coordination were evident in this flight. The lack of backup on the fuel adjustment and the disparity between my bingo calculation and the aircrew's calculation were evidence. While I calculated numbers to the primary divert, the aircrew based their numbers on a divert 25 miles farther away. When I reported my bingo numbers, I should have included the destination along with the state.

The quick reaction of CATCC and a solid approach into the 3-wire prevented us from testing our bingo numbers. Yet we had put ourselves and the air wing in a bad situation. A more disciplined use of checklists and better habit patterns would have prevented this situation. Using operational risk management during the brief might have helped us focus on differences between unit-level training and operational missions.

*Lt. Bryla flies with VAW-125.*

## My Side of the Story

*by Cdr. R.H. Ricardo*


I never thought I could dump down to the standpipes, and I never would have believed I would do it as a skipper with close to 4,000 hours

in the E-2. Yet when I look back on this event, I can see that all the signs were there.

After months of flying in two challenging theaters where the prospect of real conflict was continually peeking around the corner, things quickly faded to routine when the pressure eases off a little. I should have recognized this fade to routine when night traps started to get "comfortable."

In my four E-2 squadrons, we always put our fingers on the fuel gauge when the dumps came on. Even with the new strip gauges, I would find some place near the gauge to place my hand until the dumps were off. When my copilot didn't do it this time, I thought I wouldn't make a big deal out of it and let it go. I shouldn't have. That habit serves a good purpose.

After a couple of Class A mishaps a few years back, the E-2 community took a hard look at how to better involve all members of the crew. Five heads are better than one. When the dumps come on, the mission commander usually calls out each minute to remind the crew to look at the gauge. We didn't do it that night. I distinctly remember the absence of the time hack from the back end, yet I did nothing about it.

This incident didn't leave us with that "thousand-yard stare," but it featured all the ingredients of some of our more notorious mishaps. The holes in the Safety Center's "swiss cheese" were lining up just fine. 

*Cdr. Ricardo is the commanding officer of VAW-125.*

# On the Cat

Coming Attractions for August

- Welcome to the Land of NOD
- High Noon with a Section of Talons
- Which Way Is Up?

